

THE JEWS OF KURDISTAN

A First-Hand Report on a Near Eastern Mountain Community

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WHEN I set out to visit Kurdistan I was aware that Jewish communities existed in such towns as Kirkuk, Arbil, and Mosul. Yet the fact that there were Jews scattered all over the mountainous villages was brought to my knowledge by sheer accident, literally. An automobile smash-up on a dangerous and almost impassable mountain road, which resulted in the death of a villager, brought men and women of the nearest villages together to the market-place to mourn. The victim was a "Yahudi," I was told upon inquiry, and the people assembled there were all Jews from the neighboring villages.

I had never seen a more picturesque or impressive mourning assembly. Such Jews! Men virile and wild-looking; women wearing embroidered turbans, earrings, bracelets, even nose-rings, and with symbols tattooed into their faces—our brethren and sisters! When I asked one of the bystanders for his name, he answered, "Jonah." I replied, "Jonah ben Amitai," alluding to the name of the Biblical Prophet, Jonah, and he excitedly exclaimed,

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"Wallah, Shema Yisrael!" Yet he remained incredulous, taking me for an "Inglesi," until the words "Zion," "Yerushalayim," "Shema Yisrael," convinced him.

It was as a result of meeting these "Jonahs" that I decided to penetrate into the interior of Kurdistan and to visit their villages. I found hardly a village in those highlands that had no Jews, though there are usually not more than six or eight families, utterly isolated and, owing to the mountainous terrain, without contact with their fellow Jews of other village communities. Here one could readily understand the original, tragic meaning of exile and dispersion.

THERE is hardly a people in the Islamic Orient whose history and origin, language and customs are more unknown and less explored than those of the Kurds. Kurdistan is no political or geographical entity, has no fixed boundaries, and is generally meant to denote the territory in which the ethnic group of the Kurds lives; today, this area is divided mainly between Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, although there exists a large Kurdish diaspora in Asiatic Russia, Northern Syria, Luristan, and Khorasan.

If until modern times Kurdistan has remained a *terra incognita*, there are obvious reasons for that fact. Those who have penetrated the massive, rugged mountainous regions, passed the ravines and wide gorges, crossed the rapid torrents and swollen rivers, boiling cataracts and whirlpools, can see at first hand how nature itself has rendered Kurdistan an almost inaccessible fortress.

The scenery, with its many contrasts and constantly changing beauty, is matched only by the great diversity of its inhabitants. They are an incredible variety of religious, ethnic, and national groups. In addition to the

Kurdish tribes, who form the bulk of the population, there are Arab and Turkoman tribes, Oriental Christian groups of many denominations (Nestorians, Assyrians, Armenians), Yezidis or so-called devil worshipers, Mandeans—in short, a living ethnological museum. Within this web of races, sects, and religions in this remote corner of Asia there also live, scattered over the entire mountainous region, "Remnants of Israel"—Jews—estimated at present at about eighteen thousand souls.

THE history of these Jews in Kurdistan, where they came from and when they settled there, is shrouded in great obscurity. The Biblical and Talmudic literature contain only a few vague references to this region. Most of the early Targum, Syriac, and Arabic sources identify Kurdistan with Kardû, or the land of the Kurdîni, and with the territory of Mount Ararat, on which, according to tradition, the Ark of Noah rested after the deluge.

The Jews of Kurdistan themselves claim to be the descendants of the Ten Tribes, or at least the remnants of the Babylonian captivity—after all, why not? Actually, the first and only historical event bearing on Jewish settlements in Kurdistan goes back to the 12th century and is connected with the appearance (1146-1147) of the pseudo-Messiah David Alroy. Coming from Amadiyya in the central region of Kurdistan, an ancient stronghold of Kurdish feudal lords, he initiated a messianic movement which gained adherents among the Jewish communities as far as Urmia, Salmas, Tabriz, and Maragha in Persia. And, indeed, to this day, David Alroy is the only Jew from Kurdistan to enter recorded history.

One of our earlier sources of information about this Kurdish Jew, and Kurdish Jews in general, is the famous travelogue *Massoth Benyamin*, of Benjamin of Tudela, who visited many Oriental communities in Asia around 1170. Though neither Benjamin of Tudela nor other medieval Jewish travelers (such as Petachia of Ratisbon, or Yahuda al-Charizi, or the 16th-century Yemenite

traveler and poet Zachariah ibn Saadya al-Dahiri) penetrated into the central region of Kurdistan, it is safe to conclude from these travelers' accounts, from references in the Gaonic literature, and from archaeological and linguistic indications, that even prior to the appearance of David Alroy, Jews had been living for many centuries in this part of the Asiatic world. That they continued to live in Kurdistan from the Middle Ages to the present is evidenced by documents found in their own Geniza from the 16th century on, and particularly by the *Travels of Rabbi David de Beth Hillel*, who in 1828 toured the interior of Kurdistan and left us a report which constitutes the best and most reliable source of our knowledge of this Oriental Jewish community in the 19th century.

THE peculiar mode of life of the Jews in this part of the globe arises from the social structure of the Kurdish tribesmen in whose midst they live. The Kurds have a highly developed tribal consciousness and the whole Kurdish population is organized on a tribal basis. Every Kurd is first and foremost not an Iraqi, a Turki, or an Irani, but a member of his tribe, and adheres to its law and custom; the shape, color, or form of the headgear and of the dress is, in most cases, an external sign of the tribal affiliation. The Kurd's authority is the feudal lord or Agha, the head of the tribe, to whom he subordinates himself. Each tribe is again divided into sections, sub-tribes, clans, and families, sometimes united in a tribal confederation, but more often at war with each other in inter-tribal battles. The tribes include the semi-nomadic of the plains and hills, the sedentary tribes in the mountains, and the pure nomadic, who migrate every season with their flocks into the territory of other tribes, causing raids and counter-raids, pillage, feuds, and unrest.

Within such a tribally organized society the Jews, different in religion, language, and habits, had no place. They gradually became the pariahs and outcasts, despised and degraded, in which condition they have re-

mained until the present day. They were not permitted to carry arms or to engage in any tribal feud—and this in a country where a rifle or a dagger is deemed an indispensable companion even by the Kurdish women. For the sake of their very survival the Jews had, under these circumstances, to place themselves under the protection of the tribal chief, who dealt with “his” Jews as his own property. As in medieval serfdom, it was not uncommon to find Jews as well as Christians as slaves of the Agha, and although they were thus “protected,” the hostilities among the various tribes took heavy toll of them.

It is true that the position of the Jews in Kurdistan as outsiders, belonging to no tribe, had certain advantages, economically and politically. The Jews were the only ones who could move from tribe to tribe, whether friend or foe, without being challenged on account of a tribal feud. This enabled some Jews to earn their livelihood as peddlers, making their tours, with their bundle on a mule or a donkey, across mountains and rivers, through dangerous territories of hostile tribes—though not infrequently falling victims to indiscriminating brigands.

A century ago, when Kurdistan formed a part of the Asiatic provinces of the Ottoman Empire, the pashas knew very well how to make use of the Jews, in their special position as “neutrals” and “outsiders” amid the never-ceasing tribal feuds. In his desire to extract as much money as possible from his subjects, by way of taxation, confiscation, and other methods, the pasha learned to employ the services and abilities of some of the non-Muslim subjects for his money-raising chores. Not only Jews, but also Christians became instruments for the carrying out of financial tasks entrusted to the pasha by the sultan in Constantinople, in exchange for which they could expect protection for their co-religionists. That is how some individual Jews in Kurdistan found themselves functioning at the beginning of the 19th century as court treasurers, tax-collectors, customs officials, or in similar capacities in the service of the pasha or his subordinates.

It may be assumed that the existence of these Jewish officials who, at the same time, were also the leaders of their small Jewish communities, created a certain stability and security. When, however, in 1832, the Turkish authorities decided to crush the spirit of resistance and rebellion of the tribal chieftains and feudal lords in Kurdistan, the Jews were severely affected by the struggle and bloodshed. As a consequence of the deterioration of their position, many Jews emigrated to Palestine. The gloomy picture painted by the travelers of the 19th century reflects the agony of these turbulent years. So bad, indeed, did conditions subsequently become that the intervention of the Chief Rabbi at Constantinople at the court of the Grand Vizier was sought; the ineffectiveness of such action is shown by the fact that the Kurdish Jews continued to appeal to the Alliance Israélite Universelle and to other Jewish authorities in Europe for intervention and help.

And although the political conditions in the Kurdistan of today have changed with the setting up of an independent Iraq, the contempt in which the Kurdish Jews were held, and the atmosphere of hatred, have remained unaltered.

THE occupational structure of the Kurdish Jews is quite different from that of other Oriental communities. While Jews in Bagdad and Basra could and did attain quite prominent positions in the 19th and 20th centuries, as lawyers, bankers, physicians, and big merchants—in the time of King Feisal I, there was even a Jewish Minister of Finance, Sassoon Yeshekiel Effendi—Jews in Kurdistan have had no such opportunities. Neither “intellectuals,” “professionals,” nor wealthy merchants existed among them. The Kurdish Jew was and is basically a laborer, a worker, engaged in physical work. In the course of my travels through all parts of Kurdistan, I encountered Jews who were weavers, tanners, dyers, woodchoppers, porters, boatmen.

It was an unforgettable occasion for me when I met in Amadiyya, the birthplace of

David Alroy, a group of roadworkers, engaged in surfacing a highway, whose whole bearing, not less than their beards and their "tsitsith," proclaimed them to be Jews. When I greeted them with "Shalom aleichem," they began to talk in their language, Aramaic, and it seemed as if we were in a colony somewhere in Emek Yisrael, in Palestine. Jews have also attained some fame as gold and silversmiths in Sulaimaniyya, where they almost monopolize this field.

Along with Jewish artisans and small merchants, there is a class of Jewish farmers, who manage to exist despite their legal and social disabilities. In a number of villages in Acra, Ushnu, Sukho, and Be Tenura, Jews own cattle, sheep, and goats, possess land, fields, and vineyards, and are engaged in agricultural occupations of all sorts. An outstanding case of a Jewish agricultural settlement is the village of Sandur near Dahok, on the way to Amadiyya. This is a Jewish village almost exclusively inhabited by about a hundred families of Kurdish Jews, administered by a Jewish headman, responsible in Turkish times to the pasha of Amadiyya, now to the Iraqi governor of the district. Sandur lies at the foot of a mountain range, surrounded by poplar trees, vineyards, and orchards, and its Jewish population, men and women, works in all branches of farming and handicraft. All through the 19th century travelers were attracted and impressed by this Jewish agricultural settlement in the very heart of the Kurdish mountains, by the beautiful gardens and fruit trees, the abundant flocks, the good waters, and excellent wines.

I, too, was greatly moved by the sight of Jews, working under a burning sun, digging and hoeing in their vineyards and fields, and singing Jewish-Aramaic melodies during their work. Powerfully-built men, a Jonah, an Ezra, a Zachariah, a Mordecai, a Hanoah, an Amos, and others, greeted me with their "shalom" and allowed me to investigate their old Geniza in the still well-preserved synagogue, built several centuries ago. The considerable size of their synagogue indicated that the congregation must have been much larger in previous times.

IN THEIR language the Kurdish Jews differ from their Moslem neighbors as well as from all other Jews in the Diaspora. Though Hebrew is understood by some of them and many can make themselves understood in one or another Kurdish dialect intermingled with Turkish, Persian, or Arabic words, their specific language is Aramaic. Aramaic was once the popular language of the Near East and the official language of the Babylonian Jews for many centuries, but it was replaced through the spread of Islam in the 7th century by Arabic. Only in Kurdistan and a few other small regions of the East has the linguistic conquest of the Arabic language been successfully resisted, so that until today Jews, as well as Christian Nestorians in Kurdistan, speak an Aramaic dialect. This Aramaic is closely related to the Aramaic portions of the Bible (in the Books of Ezra and Daniel), and very akin to the Aramaic of the Targum and the Talmud. Written in Hebrew script, which is also applied to the Kurdish, Persian, Arabic, or Turkish words, this language of the Kurdish Jews is variously called "Lishna Yahudiyya" ("the Jewish language"), "Lashon ha-Targum" ("language of the Targum"), and "Jebali" ("the mountain language"). Nowhere else in the Jewish world is Aramaic of any sort still a living and spoken language.

This linguistic separation of the Jews from their neighbors has had some practical advantages. Living within a tribal society, in which each tribe had its own peculiar dialect, Jews—scattered over hundreds of villages belonging to various tribes and clans—would have been hopelessly fragmented. The Aramaic dialect of the Kurdish Jews constitutes a bond of unity in the region of Kurdistan and Azerbaijan and the most reliable and characteristic criterion for a "Kurdish Jew."

It is this persistence of Aramaic, first noticed in early medieval times, then by Benjamin of Tudela, and later by David de Beth Hillel, which has drawn the attention of European scholars to the Kurdish Jews. In the last decades a systematic attempt has been made to commit to writing the hitherto

unwritten literature of the Kurdish Jews, and texts in their special vernacular have been published, thus preserving in the written word their traditions, literature, and folklore.

It is hardly possible to speak of any accomplishments of the Kurdish Jews in the field of literature. Their cultural level has been as low as, if not lower than, that of their neighbors. Like the literature of the Mohammedan Kurds, that of the Kurdish Jews also consisted mainly of popular sayings, stories, songs, poems, and particularly translations into "Targum" or "Jebali" of ritual or liturgical treatises or Biblical books. One of the few outstanding authors among them was Simon ben Jonah al-Barazani, of the 17th century, one of whose manuscripts I brought back to Jerusalem. In recent years a Kurdish Jew, Baruch Samuel Misrachi, published, under the title *Shire Simra*, an anthology of folk songs in Aramaic, Hebrew, Kurdish, and Arabic; also, two cabalistic treatises by Elijah Abraham Misrachi have been printed in Jerusalem.

KURDISH Jews have only a few synagogues. Those which are still in existence are mostly old wooden structures, devoid of any ornamental or decorative attraction, in a state of utter neglect and decay and not infrequently used in part for storage of grain and other materials. The synagogue in Amadiyya contains an old Hebrew inscription on one of its wooden pillars which indicates that it was built seven centuries ago. Most of the Jewish settlements in the mountainous region, however, often with less than ten Jewish families, are lacking in all those religious institutions which are usually regarded as essentials for Jewish life. The first modern schools for Kurdish Jews were opened only at the beginning of the 20th century by the Alliance Israélite Universelle, in Mosul and Senneh.

Despite their lack of Jewish and general education, Kurdish Jews adhere very rigidly to their old traditions, and observe circumcision, dietary laws, family laws, and Sabbath observance. They are very strict in observing

the Sabbath; during the past war, when Jews were occupied in road-building, the engineer in charge experienced that peculiar problem and reported: "The Jews were the most exacting of all in their observances. No Jew may work on a Saturday and perhaps that is why so few ever came to my camp."

In reaction to the isolation of Kurdish Jews, there grew up the institution of a wandering rabbi (not a "wonder" rabbi), who visited the communities at intervals of six months or even more, to perform ritual functions and inspire the people religiously. There also grew up a literature of correspondence between the larger centers and the smaller villages, which has revealed many interesting details of their internal life. Both their lives and their letters reveal one special feature: the great role which superstition and magic has played among them.

In their ideas and actions they are influenced by a belief in devils, demons or *shedim*, and the evil eye, not only in all matters pertaining to life and death, but in their everyday affairs. The use of amulets and *goraloth* is applied to almost every event in life. Even the art of the Jewish silversmiths is entirely dominated by magic. Amulet-boxes, silver chains, and jewelry of a special kind are used as a protection against the evil spirits. The belief in dreams and their influence on the life of man is also widespread. The analysis and interpretation of such dreams has become almost a profession inherited from ancestors and carried out by a *hacham*. Wherever he lives, his services for the supply of "spiritual" medicine, with the aid of some mysterious scribbling to ward off peril and diseases of all kinds, are greatly in demand by Jews as well as by Kurds, who regard him as a magician, fortune teller, wizard, and healer. When in search of ancient manuscripts in the houses of such *hachamim*, I found that most of the available works dealt with Cabala, talismans, *goraloth*, dream books, and the like.

Under the influence of their Moslem surroundings, the Kurdish Jews, like all Oriental Jews, have developed the custom of pilgrim-

ages to holy places to visit the tombs of prophets and spiritual leaders. Even now, the alleged tomb of the prophet Ezekiel, near Hilla, the tomb of Ezra, near Kurna, the burial place of the high priest Joshua, in Bagdad, the tombs of Mordecai and Esther in Hamadan, of Shara Bat Asher, in Isfahan, and others, attract multitudes of Oriental Jews every year. In addition to these, Kurdish Jews have holy sites of their own. Most prominent among them is the alleged tomb of Jonah, near Nineveh, the sepulcher of Daniel and his three companions, in Kirkuk, and foremost, the supposed tomb of Nahum, the prophet, in Alkosh, to which yearly pilgrimages are made. It is this tomb of Nahum which seems to have the quality of a national sanctuary for the Kurdish Jews, and the description of the ceremonies of the pilgrimage and of the miracles experienced have been preserved in the travelogues of visitors. Whenever I ventured to inquire about the authenticity of these national shrines and holy sites, I was the target for menacing looks that made me quickly change the subject.

DESPITE the fact that these remote Jewish communities in the wild mountains of Kurdistan have been so isolated from the outside world, they have not ceased to culti-

vate cultural ties with the Jews in Palestine. The longing for Zion, which has persisted among them throughout the centuries, has expressed itself again and again in letters (we have some from the 18th century) sent from Amadiyya, Sacho, Sandor, and other communities to Safed, Tiberias, or Jerusalem. No doubt these feelings were enhanced and strengthened by those envoys from Zion, *sh'lichim*, who, during the last centuries, crossed the Euphrates and Tigris and the river Zab and penetrated into these remote regions in search of their brethren, as well as by the travelers to Kurdistan within the last decade. It is not surprising, then, that Kurdish Jews should have been among the first of all Oriental Jews who began to pour into Palestine as early as the first part of the 19th century, and no wonder that, during my tour through these villages, I was besieged with requests to procure certificates for emigration into Palestine.

Today Palestine has the greatest colony of Kurdish Jews outside their original native land, numbering well over 8500. They have established agricultural and urban settlements, and one of the agricultural colonies in the Emek significantly bears the name of "David Alroy"—the false Messiah who, the Kurdish Jews in Palestine now feel, may merely have been somewhat premature.